



# Frequently Asked Questions about Outdoor Burning

From Ecology's Air Quality Program

## 2007 Burn Ban Q and A – Let's Clear the Air!

**Q: What is going to be different starting January 1, 2007?**

**A:** Starting January 1, 2007, residential and land clearing burning will be banned in all urban growth areas (UGAs) in the state of Washington. These will include the UGAs for cities like Bridgeport, Cashmere, Chelan, Colville, Connell, Dayton, Entiat, Cle Elum, Ephrata, George, Grand Coulee, Leavenworth, Manson and Mansfield, to name a few.

**In all, nearly 70 communities in eastern Washington will come under the new regulation.** Right now, the law bans outdoor burning within the Urban Growth Areas for cities with more than 5,000 people. The ban does not apply to agricultural burning or limit recreational (camp fires) burning.

The new law will also prohibit land-clearing burning in areas with population densities of greater than 1,000 people per square mile.

**Q: What is residential burning?**

**A:** Residential burning is a fire meant to dispose of household yard waste, such as leaves, grass, brush and other yard trimmings.

**Q: When was this law passed?**

**A:** The Washington State Legislature passed the law in 1991 as part of Washington's Clean Air Act, and voted to phase in the ban on residential burning. The ban was originally set to take effect in 2001. This was to give local governments and communities time to develop alternatives to burning, such as composting, chipping, curbside pickup of yard waste, local yard waste disposal stations, and seasonal cleanup days. In 1998, the Legislature delayed the ban for smaller communities until January 1, 2007, to give them more time to make these preparations.

For communities with populations of 5,000 or more, outdoor burning has been banned since 2001.

Garbage burning and burn barrels are illegal everywhere in Washington.



**Q: Why is this law necessary?**

**A:** The law was passed as part of the state Clean Air Act to protect human health and safety. Burning natural vegetation (such as leaves, grass, brush, and pine needles) produces **air pollution**. Reducing air pollution is one way Ecology is working to decrease toxics in the environment. Smoke releases **carbon monoxide** and **fine particles** that pollute the air, water, and soil. Pollution from smoke can cause serious health problems when inhaled. Lung disease, asthma, and even cancer have been linked to breathing the fine particles in smoke. Children, the elderly, and those suffering from chronic respiratory conditions (such as asthma, emphysema, and bronchitis) are the most vulnerable to poor air quality. Lung cancer is the leading cancer killer of women.

In addition to being unhealthy, backyard fires are dangerous to property. Burning puts additional burdens on busy local fire districts when fires get out of control (the leading cause of human-caused wildfires). You can also be held responsible for fire suppression costs – which are very expensive, often running into hundreds of thousands of dollars.

**Q: If I live in a less populated area, is smoke really a problem?**

**A:** Air pollution is just as much a problem in less populated areas as urban areas, although its sources may be different. Rural populations are more affected by smoke from fire and from windblown dust, while urban areas are more likely to contend with smog. Both smoke and dust can affect the lungs, sting the eyes, and worsen heart and lung disease.

**Q: Doesn't smoke just blow away in rural areas?**

**A:** Sometimes – but not if there is no wind, or if you live in a valley. After sunset, cool air drops down from higher elevations and settles in valley floors. This cool, dense air carries smoke from outdoor fires and woodstoves, and accumulates near the valley bottom. Although some smoke may escape through valley openings or gaps, and spread to another larger valley, most of the smoke remains trapped until the sun has warmed the ground sufficiently. Then, just like a hot air balloon, the smoke can rise out of the valley to be dispersed.

In the winter, the days rarely warm up enough to disperse the smoke, and new emissions add to an already high concentration of smoke trapped in the valleys. Sometimes these cold pools are so firmly entrenched that weak weather systems will ride across the top without clearing out the valley below.

Even on the shorter summer nights, the concentration of smoke can reach levels which may aggravate breathing problems before being cleared out the following day.

With smoke, dilution is not the solution to pollution.

**Q: Why is the Forest Service allowed to burn, but we can't?**

**A:** Fire helps sustain the health of our forests. While forest burning is allowed, it must be conducted under strict guidelines. The U.S. Forest Service coordinates its prescribed burning program with the Washington State Department of Natural Resources, which uses weather (or atmospheric) modeling tools to make safer burn permit decisions.

Forest Service burns require permits and permission from the Department of Natural Resources.

**Q: Why do farmers and orchardists get to burn for agricultural purposes?**

**A:** Fire is an important tool farmers use to clear their land for a new crop. Farmers must show that burning is necessary, and the burning must be conducted on days designated by Ecology through the agricultural burn permit program. Ecology works with farmers to make sure they only burn when air movement (ventilation) is good, which minimizes smoke impact. Farmers must also keep fires to a manageable size. Ecology operates a public notice system to forewarn people when burns will happen so they can make plans to minimize their exposure.

Agricultural burns require permits from Ecology. Ecology does not always grant burn permits. Alternatives to burning are always promoted.

**Q: What should I do with all my yard waste and debris?**

**A:** Some possible options include composting, chipping, curbside pickup of yard waste, hauling debris to local yard waste disposal stations, and seasonal cleanup days.

Ecology, local air authorities, solid waste departments, and fire protection districts have been working together around the state to develop customized alternatives that work for local citizens, cities, and towns. Call your local solid waste department to find out what alternatives are available to you.

Communities can apply for Coordinated Prevention Grants (CPG) to buy chippers, to help haul yard waste, or to develop other solutions to the garden waste disposal issue. Communities can also apply for Public Participation Grants (PPG) to fund public education programs relating to alternatives to burning.

**Q: What if I want to clear my land?**

**A:** Whether or not you can burn depends on the reason for clearing the land. Burning to clear the land for development will not be allowed within an urban growth area or in areas with a population density of 1,000 per square mile. Farmers may be able to burn cropland if they are changing a crop or have a pest infestation.

Land clearing burning requires a permit. Check with your local building department or county planning department to learn what is required in your area.

**Q: What about burn barrels? I still see a lot of burn barrels out there.**

**A:** It is illegal to burn anything in a burn barrel in the state of Washington, and has been since 2000.

**Q: What happens if I keep burning?**

**A:** People who burn illegally may be subject to fines of up to \$10,000 per day, per violation.

**Q: Who should I call if someone is illegally burning?**

**A:** It depends on which county you are in:

- Benton Clean Air Authority: 509-943-3396
- Department of Ecology - Adams, Asotin, Chelan, Columbia, Douglas, Ferry, Garfield, Grant, Kittitas, Klickitat, Lincoln, Okanogan, Pend Oreille, Spokane, Stevens, Walla Walla and Whitman counties: 1-866-211-6284
- Environmental Protection Agency – Indian Reservations: 1-800-424-4EPA
- Northwest Clean Air Agency - Whatcom, Island, & Skagit counties: 1-800-622-4627
- Olympic Region Clean Air Agency - Thurston, Mason, Pacific, Grays Harbor, Jefferson, & Clallam counties: 1-800-422-5623
- Puget Sound Clean Air Agency - King, Snohomish, Pierce, & Kitsap counties: 1-800-552-3565
- Southwest Clean Air Agency - Lewis, Skamania, Clark, Cowlitz, & Wahkiakum counties: 1-800-633-0709
- Spokane County Air Pollution Control Authority: 509-477-4727
- Yakima Regional Clean Air Authority 509-834-2050

If you are having difficulty breathing or if smoke from an outdoor burn is getting into your house, call 911 for immediate help.

Information on this topic is available on Ecology's web site. The address is:

[http://www.ecy.wa.gov/programs/air/outdoor\\_woodsmoke/residentialburn.htm](http://www.ecy.wa.gov/programs/air/outdoor_woodsmoke/residentialburn.htm) .

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